



Rashad Hussain– Australia CVE Summit

A Strategy for Countering Terrorist

Propaganda in the Digital Age

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Thank you. It is an honor to be here today to engage with such an esteemed group of leaders from around the world. This is an incredibly important opportunity to exchange ideas so that we can continue to build concrete partnerships to address some of the major international security issues we are facing today.

One of these issues that we've been working with many of you on has been the challenge of countering violent extremism around the world. The challenge we are facing is that ISIL and other terrorist groups are exploiting ideas and grievances that resonate with various audiences and using a warped ideology to recruit disaffected youth by offering them a false sense of purpose, belonging, and religious obligation and reward. ISIL's perceived successes have also led other groups to pledge allegiance to the so-called Caliphate. Although there is not a uniform path to radicalization, there are a number of common factors present in most cases:

1. **Grievance-** Terrorists typically prey on political grievances, particularly their narrative of Western responsibility for Muslim suffering around the world. They also exploit a number of other grievances, including discrimination and alienation, repression of freedom of expression and freedom of religion, violations of human rights, restrictions on political expression and activity, and lack of economic opportunity. In many parts of the world, the presence of "push factors" such as poverty, illiteracy, and poor education provide a fertile landscape that terrorists further exploit.

2. **Ideology-** Terrorists use a warped version of Islam, including the manipulation of verses of the Quran and *hadith* (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), to argue that Muslims have an obligation to use violence to defend Muslim communities around the world. Their message has also taken on a decidedly sectarian tone, as they call on Muslims to defend Sunni Muslims from Shi'a aggression. As a part of this narrative, they misuse and exploit the concepts of *jihad* and *takfir* (declaring individuals and groups to be non-Muslims). ISIL has also added an additional element to this message. In their call to re-establish the caliphate (a concept that many Muslims view positively based on their belief in the respected early Islamic caliphs), they claim that a small group of fighters is, through divine support, taking on armies, acquiring land, fulfilling the "Islamic" vision of creating an Islamic state, and defending the Muslim *ummah*. Terrorist groups use these concepts to instill a sense of purpose, empowerment, adventure, and religious obligation and reward.



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The role of ideology is particularly important because it accentuates all of other factors in the radicalization process. If individuals have grievances in their personal life, terrorists attempt to convince them that the terrorist path will provide them a sense of purpose and that their reward will be an afterlife free of problems. If the grievance is political in nature, the terrorists' message emphasizes that following their path is the most rewarding way of defending Islam and Muslims and achieving paradise. Ideology thereby becomes the vehicle, justification, or even the excuse that violent extremists use to act on their grievances.

3. **Presence of an Influencer**- Recruits rarely radicalize on their own; they are almost always influenced by a figure in their community or by an individual or group in the online space who uses grievance and ideology to reel them in.

Countering the Threat with Counter-messaging and Positive Narratives

So how do we respond? If terrorists are calling people to a path they call righteous and holy, we have to be clear that the terrorist path is prohibited. If they claim to be defending Islam and Muslims, we have to illustrate vividly how they are destroying Muslim communities. And if terrorists are trying to convince young people that they'll be joining a winning team, we have to convince their targets that they will be joining a losing one. As the President emphasized in addressing Muslim youth, "You come from a great tradition that stands for education, not ignorance; innovation, not destruction; the dignity of life, not murder. Those who call you away from this path are betraying this tradition, not defending it."

Part of the messaging challenge that we are facing is that extremists are producing and disseminating materials that are often much more emotionally appealing than government statements and religious leader edicts and direct-to-camera condemnations of terrorism.

The effort against these groups is not a traditional information battle or campaign. In a traditional campaign, if your opponent has approval ratings in the single digits, such as ISIL has in much of the Muslim world, you would think that you are pretty well-positioned. But what ISIL has done is cast a wide net in their recruiting by trying to appeal to the grievances of its various audiences. The fact remains that the overwhelming majority of 1.6 billion Muslims have rejected ISIL's tactics, but they are able to draw from the small percentage of people who may be susceptible to recruitment. And while this is a small percentage - perhaps less than one percent - in real numbers, it means they have been able to recruit tens of thousands of foreign fighters, which is unacceptable, and demonstrates that we have much work to do.

Many people have asked about a imbalance they perceive in which ISIL's content has spread across social media. While we see numbers indicating that they produce tens of thousands of tweets daily, one study shows that they have 500-2,000 dedicated tweeters and many of their



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tweets are sent out by bots without followers tweeting into oblivion. What do these numbers really mean? On a daily basis in the Arab world, we see more tweets daily on topics like "football" and "cats" and tweets that include the name of Arab pop culture figures. In fact, we see more tweets using the pejorative term "Da'esh," possibly indicating that there is comparable body of counter content out there.

But this counter content is not as sensational as terrorist content and doesn't attract the same headlines. And frankly, when most people see extremist content in their Twitter feeds, they dismiss it as crazy and ignore it. They don't reply or produce counter content.

But we have to contest the information space. Not only to reach those that may be on the fence, but to disseminate messaging that will prevent young people from ever getting to the fence.

We believe we have a mechanism to do so. We are expanding our Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) to face evolving threats, we are pleased that a number of governments and NGOs have approached us to see how they might use our Center as a model for their own efforts.

We have recently added an inter-agency counter-ISIL cell to the CSCC that is focusing on three main areas:

First, we're expanding our messaging efforts, including with original content on social media platforms, in Arabic, Somali, Urdu, Hausa, and English, to amplify (a) stories of ISIL defectors and former fighters, (b) poor living conditions under ISIL, (c) ISIL battlefield losses and internal divisions, (d) ISIL atrocities, particularly against Muslims, who make up a vast majority of ISIL's victims (e) statements from credible voices in the Muslim world, and (f) positive narratives emphasizing our values and the examples of young people around the world who are addressing challenges they face through productive means.

Second, we're expanding partnerships with foreign governments and NGO partners to directly counter ISIL's messaging. Recognizing that other partners around the world will in some cases have the unique ability to respond to certain aspects of ISIL's messaging, we are supporting NGOs who are countering ISIL's narrative and helping other countries to establish their own counter-ISIL messaging centers. The UAE has opened a center that will soon go live, and we are working with other countries on similar efforts.

Third, we're coordinating US government and Coalition messaging by issuing daily and thematic guidances on the counter-ISIL topics I mentioned to nearly 3,000 US government officials as well as Coalition partners. We are also developing a content sharing platform so that US



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government offices around the world and our Coalition partners can work together to upload, download, curate, and produce counter-ISIL content.

Expanding International Efforts

This is simply one model, and I want to talk a bit more about how we can work together to counter terrorist propaganda. As we have heard suggested during our engagement around the world – including with OIC countries, Muslim communities, youth, civil society, and religious leaders – some of the most effective responses will come from governments and non-governmental organizations in the Muslim world. While many of the themes I will describe are the focus of our messaging efforts, including online, I would like to propose to this group that Muslim-hosted and run messaging initiatives and entities should be established to take a leading role in utilizing the following approaches to counter terrorist messaging.

1) Highlighting former radicals and Muslim victims of terrorism- Messaging initiatives should produce content that erodes the terrorists' credibility by using images and credible Muslim voices to clearly illustrate how ISIL, al Qaeda and their affiliates are killing mostly Muslims, including women and children, rather than defending the Muslim communities. Family members of victims and terrorists, former foreign fighters, and former radicals could also provide testimonials describing how their lives have been destroyed by misguided participation in extremist causes. These materials can be titled and compiled in ways to ensure that they appear as top hits when searches are conducted.

2) Amplifying the Islamic response to extremists to stem recruiting- Messaging initiatives and entities in the Muslim world should create and disseminate content, including videos, that grapple with the same grievances as extremist materials and conclude with powerful messages of “the proper Islamic/Prophetic response” and descriptions of the theologically proscribed consequences for those who kill innocent people. Direct-to-camera videos of qualified Islamic scholars making religious arguments are important but insufficient; to be successful, these materials must also provide a credible hook and a sense of purpose and obligation. New media content must include materials in which Muslim leaders stress that ISIL is not “Islamic,” not a state, not the Caliphate, and that its efforts will fail. It must also convey that ISIL is actually flagrantly violating the principles established by the respected early Caliphs of Islam, and that joining Daesh is *haraam* (prohibited in Islam). As the Quran emphasizes, for example, whoever kills an innocent person, it is as if he has killed all of humanity. And whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all of humanity.



3) **“De-glamorizing” Daesh-** In addition to making clear that ISIL is not the Caliphate, content should highlight instances in which Daesh fighters have retreated and lost ground. Content should also deglamorize the foreign fighter lifestyle by showing the miserable living conditions that fighters are forced to endure. I am sure you are aware, for example, of the reports of recruited fighters being used as janitors and servants.

4) **Maintaining a more constant and creative online presence-** Messaging initiatives and centers should maintain a constant presence on extremist message boards in multiple languages to combat terrorist narratives and religious arguments and justifications.

5) **Highlighting positive narratives-** Content would also include materials combating the narrative that devout Muslim youth cannot succeed in the modern world. It would highlight similarly situated Muslims who are overcoming odds to succeed and Muslims who are expressing their grievances and channeling their energy in positive, impactful ways. Such materials would also highlight Muslims engaged in humanitarian work that directly benefits those suffering from poverty, disease, and conflict. Those who gain experience in creating and publishing such content will form an invaluable cadre of experts who can be used in other settings, including de-radicalization programming.

This content should be used not just to counter Da'esh or al Qaeda, but also to affirmatively address common ideological elements that extremist groups will continue to advance. In many instances, counter-content will be most credible when it is not seen as counter-content, but as an affirmative and positive narrative of what Muslim youth can do to address the grievances that extremists articulate. Like extremist messaging, counter-content could draw in youth with emotional images and themes. It would foster a sense of purpose, belonging, and obligation, but will (a) provide positive alternatives for channeling efforts; (b) reject terrorism by using imagery and religious content that demonstrates how terrorists are hurting Muslims and Islam; and (c) include testimonials from former fighters, former radicals, victims of terrorism, and credible scholars and thought influencers.

Building International Cooperation: Working with Partner Countries and Organizations

There are a number of ways in which governments and NGOS might support the creation and dissemination of credible content and positive alternatives to extremist narratives:

1. Support for Messaging Centers and Initiatives- Governments, NGOs, and private companies can fund counter-messaging initiatives and centers and collaborate in sharing training, exchanges, and technical expertise.



2. Content Creation Grants- Every country can offer grants that sponsor the creation of CVE social media and other content. Governments could offer attractive grants to individuals and groups – particularly in this region – to create campaigns, companies and organizations to disseminate CVE content. Such an initiative could be also designed as an initiative to further spur regional social entrepreneurship.

3. Regional Conferences- Arab and OIC countries, for example, could convene events similar to this event by bringing together media, social media leaders, foundations, interested private sector leaders, and religious leaders to establish mechanisms for creating content targeting youth audiences. These types of events could be replicated in Southeast Asia, North Africa, and elsewhere.

4. Online Competitions- Like this week’s hackathon, Governments and NGOs could also hold national, pan-Arab, and OIC-wide online contests to incentivize the creation of CVE, anti-Daesh, and positive content. Competition would spur the creation of ideas that are tailored to particular localities and that could then be distributed to target specific audiences.

5. Amplification of Messages within Muslim-Majority Countries- Multiple sectors of societies, including governments, NGOs, private industry, media, and influential figures should highlight inspiring stories, strong role models, and other positive narratives around the Muslim world. Similarly, they should also underscore the destructive impact of terrorism on Muslim communities by broadcasting the stories of former radicals and foreign fighters who condemn terrorists’ actions and approaches.

6. Amplifying and Mobilizing Religious Leaders - In addition to amplifying their statements, edicts, and sermons, religious leaders can be mobilized as parts of rapid-response teams of influential figures to travel together to regions where extremism is gaining a foothold. Individual statements are important, but delegations of the most influential international imams coming together with a common message would be much more visible and powerful.

7. Providing Positive Alternatives to Address Conflict and Humanitarian Needs- For many young people who are looking to act to address the situation in Syria and other parts of the Muslim world, just telling them what not to do will not be enough. Countries and organizations in the Muslim world should continue to develop programs that provide mechanisms for young people to contribute to humanitarian efforts in the Muslim world. Many of you are familiar with the Peace Corps, and if there was an equivalent formed in the Muslim world- perhaps a Muslim Peace Corps- such a program could be a powerful way to provide opportunities to young people who are interested in participating in projects to benefit communities overseas.



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Supporting Comprehensive and Long-Term Efforts

Importantly, as we discuss our strategy for social media, we must also acknowledge that combating violent ideologies is one aspect of a comprehensive strategy that is necessary to defeat violent extremism. As Secretary Kerry recently emphasized, we must also address “the lack of economic opportunity, bad governance, corruption, the lack of economic opportunity for the average citizen, the gross violation of human dignities, [and] the failure to provide hope to a whole generation of young people in countries that are increasingly 60 and 65 percent under the age of 35.”

We have to be honest in acknowledging and assessing these challenges. Often times, in discussions on terrorism, we hear policy grievances as the motivating factor for terrorists. But as you know, the vast majority of those killed by terrorists are Muslims themselves. We have to ask ourselves, do we really believe that someone who blows up a mosque after Friday prayers is addressing a foreign policy grievance against the United States or any other government? Of course not and there can never be any grievance that justifies the killing of innocent people.

As Malala Yusafzai and others have noted, we have a crisis in both our religious and secular education for both boys and girls. And unless we can firmly establish in every child the principle that violence against the innocent is an unacceptable way to address grievances, we will continue to lose generations to terrorists. If we can’t provide our young people with a sense of purpose, terrorists will try to fill the void.

The role of education ministries is more long term and goes beyond messaging. In addition to broader improvements to education and enhanced access to education for boys and girls, textbooks and curricula should be reviewed for negative portrayals of religious minorities, including Shia, Christians, and Jews. Curricula should also reinforce that violence is an unacceptable response to political and other grievances. Over the long term, education will be one of the most powerful tools in confronting the hateful ideologies that produce violence around the world.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here – I look forward to our discussion and working with you all.